

How fast will a language die when it is officially no longer spoken?

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Abstract

This paper reports on field work on dialects of Kalashanon, an Indo-Aryan language spoken in NW Pakistan. The people concerned are Muslims who have converted from the Kalasha beliefs to Islam recently and subsequently shifted language from Kalashanon to Khowar, the language of the dominating Klio people. It is found that Kalashanon has not been given up as early as claimed. Especially among the women the language is still used, probably due to a strict separation of the male and female spheres of lives which gives room for two language codes in the society: a domestic one and a public one.

Introduction

In this paper I will discuss some of the factors that have influenced a process of language death. I will base my discussion on studies of four dialects of Kalashanon, an Indo-Aryan language spoken in North West Pakistan.¹ According to local information these dialects have not been spoken for three or more generations due to a shift of language and religion. This situation can be characterized as 'radical language death' (Campbell & Muntzel 1989: 183). I will question how radical this language death has been and I will concentrate on the ethnographic circumstances of the shift from one language to the other. I will show that well hidden behind religious and cultural barriers a language can still be spoken. This will give an idea of what can keep a language alive in spite of a strong social pressure. And it will illustrate some of the methodological problems that we faced in this difficultly accessible area.²

The Kalasha people

The Kalasha number about 3,000 people who live in three narrow side valleys to the larger Kunar Valley in the Chitral District in the western part of the Hindu Kush range in Pakistan, close to the border to Nuristan in Afghanistan.

The Kalasha are the only non-Muslim people in the multicultural and multilingual Chitral District. They practice a religion which anthropologists characterize as pre-Islamic with ancient vedic traits. Until the beginning of this century the Kalasha settlements formed part of a larger area known as Kalafistan, Land of the Unbelievers. For centuries the Kalasha have been serfs under the ruling (Muslim) Kings of Chitral, the Mehtar and in that way they have taken an inferior position compared to the surrounding Muslim peoples.

Despite official protection from the Pakistani government as an ethnic and religious minority the Kalasha are in the daily life exposed to the very aggressive neighbouring Islamic society, specifically from the largest ethnic and linguistic group, the Kho people. More and more Kho people have moved into the Kalasha valleys where they have bought land and live as farmers and shopkeepers, and today every Kalasha village has its Muslim twin with a Muslim run school, shop and a mosque. And every week the Kalasha see family members convert to Islam. With the ongoing high speed of conversion and the following language shift to Khowar, the language of the Khos and the lingua franca of Chitral, the Kalasha should be regarded as a threatened culture and Kalashamon as a threatened and probably dying language, although this last process could be slower than the religious shift.

Former Kalasha settlements

We know from the oral literature, local history and several reports from the beginning of this century that Kalasha settlements were to be found several places in southern Chitral. In these places all inhabitants are now Muslim, and the population is a mixture of Kalasha descendants, Kho-people, Pathans and descendants of Nuristani immigrants.

South of the present Kalasha area there are two side valleys where conversion from Kalasha to Islam presumably took place between 1920 and 1950. Many of the Kalasha descendants here still speak Kalashamon in the home, and even the children learn the language together with Khowar.

Besides these five valleys where Kalashamon is still spoken there are a number of villages in the main valley and in an eastward side valley where Kalashamon was spoken until the 1940's-1950's or later. Today the inhabitants of these villages speak Khowar (except in Kalkatak where they for historical reasons speak another Dardic language called Palula). These villages (Suwir, Gromel, Kalkatak, Lawi, and Birga) where Kalashamon is officially no longer spoken are the focus of this paper.

Problems linguists meet in the investigation

The investigation of the retainment of Kalashamon requires caution and tact. Generally there is a very contemptuous attitude towards the use of Kalashamon in the area because of the low status associated with the Kalasha.

Furthermore, there is a culturally determined separation of the male and female spheres of life in this area. It was therefore a great advantage for the linguistic investigation in this culture to have a research team with both a man

and a woman. We had the idea that Kalashamon was retained better in the female i.e. non-public world than in the male and public, so because I had the possibility to visit the women in their home there should be a chance of getting near the former or maybe even present speakers of Kalashamon. A problematic factor, however, was that our local contact-person would typically be a higher-ranking man of Kho origin, because in this culture you need a separate guest-room or a separate inner courtyard to house strangers properly - even if it is only for an afternoon. The people of Kalasha origin had in most cases retained a lower social position and would not be considered appropriate to house strangers.

I was usually at some point invited inside the house to meet the women. But the Kho origin of the family meant that I did not have the great opportunity to investigate the Kalasha language as we thought. Another limitation on my part was that I do not speak either Khowar, Pasho or Urdu. This means that I had problems of just asking about the knowledge of Kalashamon and to ask if the women could take me to someone who spoke the language. Sometimes I had a male accompaniment from the family to interpret (if someone knew English) but then as long as he was present no one would admit to know Kalashamon.

The findings

In Kalkatak the speakers of Kalashamon had made a decision of shifting from their old language to Palula about 20 years ago, so if this had in fact happened we would have a 'radical language death' situation. Our male informant at about 60 had not used the Kalasha language for a long time. But after a while he remembered many Kalashamon words, and it was clearly, as found by Campbell

& Muntzel (1989: 184), the more frequent and salient lexical items that were remembered first.

In Kalkatak I worked with two ladies aged about 50 who still spoke Kalashamon fluently and, contrary to what the men said, still used it among themselves.

I also worked with the wife of our male informant. She was about 55-60 years old and remembered the words on my word list quite well. We were sitting in the kitchen surrounded by her daughter and daughters-in-law, and sometimes they contributed with a word if the old lady did not remember it. They were about 25-35 years old and must have heard the language spoken in their childhood. I think that they had never been fluent in Kalashamon but should be characterized as 'rememberer' (Campbell & Muntzel 1989: 181).

In Suwir, a village opposite Kalkatak in the main valley, we were told by different people that between 10 and 100 persons still remember the language. Here we had opportunity to interview two elderly men and two elderly women. They had spoken Kalashamon when they were young and can be characterized as 'once-fully competent' speakers (Campbell & Muntzel 1989: 184). They admitted to have used the old language for a long time as a secret language to keep secrets for their children and for chatting among friends. The men were capable of having a conversation in Kalashamon. Without understanding all of it we hear many fixed phrases and a limited use of inflections. The women did not allow us to tape record the interview.

Also in Suwir we at one point went from one house to another. I was walking behind the others when a woman looked out from a house and addressed me in Khowar. I did not understand what she said and told her that in Kalashamon after which she in *Kalashamon* said to me that she did not know Kalashamon!

The village of Lawi has about 600 inhabitants and about two thirds of these are of Kalasha origin, the rest are Kho-people. It is our impression that the knowledge of Kalashamon is relatively widespread in this village but it was very difficult to obtain any data here because of a very strong aversion to Kalashamon.

In Lawi we spoke with a male informant aged 35 who could speak the language. It was claimed he was the youngest person in the village who knew Kalashamon. He said that he had learned it from his mother because he wanted to. Another man in Lawi was our informant for only a short time, then he was called home because his wife did not appreciate that he was speaking the old language in the village square in public.

In Gromel, a part of Drosh, the attitude to the past and to Kalashamon was also very negative. So no-one volunteered to work with us and we think that the woman who finally turned up was forced to by our host. She had originally come from another village, and presumably had a very low status in the village. She tried very hard to help us with words in her old mother tongue but very often she provided us with Khowar words instead.

These examples illustrate why we think that the language has been spoken for a longer time than people at first claim. Our findings about the time of conversion are thus in agreement with those of the anthropologists Cacopardo and Cacopardo as expressed in three papers from 1991.

From my visits to the women in the houses we got the impression confirmed that the Kalasha language has been retained even longer in the domestic and non-public sphere than in the public life.

Reasons for the retainment of Kalashamon

The main reason for this retainment more or less hidden from the public is to be found in a culturally and religious clear-cut separation of male and female spheres.

In this area according to both the Islamic and the cultural tradition the male world is associated with the public life. Men go to the bazaar, men go to the prayers in the mosque, men are chatting in the village square etc. The female sphere is primarily associated with the home and takes place mainly inside the house. The women meet each other during the day in their homes and in the fields. The restriction laid on their freedom of movement is that they cannot go outside in the public without veil and male accompaniment. The restriction on where a man can go is into other people's house except if he is closely related to one of the women in the house.

This strict separation of the spheres of men and women has given room for the women using Kalashamon in their daily life among themselves as a sort of domestic language code. The users of this language code are less exposed to the cultural and religious pressure in the public life where it is important to show oneself as a devoted Muslim and dissociate oneself from the pagan past. Correspondingly it is natural for the men who go about in the public to speak the language of the Islamic surroundings, namely Khowar.

There are some other reasons for a retainment of Kalashamon for some time after conversion.

One is the geographical isolation in the very narrow side-valleys where the powerful Kho-people did not come often. The way that trade has taken place in former times was that non-local travelling tradesmen came into the valleys,

and the men in the village would from time to time go to buy necessities in the main valley. This may have delayed the language shift in the valleys Jinjiet, Ursun and Shishi Kih.

Another factor is the historical connection between the various former Kalasha communities due to patterns of intermarriage. The common low social status of all Kalasha may also have reinforced a strong interconnectedness between these communities and delayed the language-shift. This factor has relevance especially to the villages in the main valley, Suwir, Kalkatak, Gromel and Lawi.

I assume that these factors together have kept the Kalashamon dialects alive for a longer time than has officially been claimed.

Conclusion

Due to the difficulties of the investigation of these dialects our material is not representative enough for making specific claims about the linguistic consequences of the language shift. Still we judge the phonology of the former language to be fairly intact and have identified some special features (not present in the dominant language) being retained in the dying language, quite in accordance with Campbell & Muntzel (1989: 183). In addition we have seen grammatical productions characterized by fairly simple constructions and phrases, as Campbell & Muntzel mention for one of their once-fully-competent speakers (Campbell & Muntzel 1989: 184). Furthermore, some of the dialects on certain points seem even more archaic than the dialects still spoken in the western valleys which also make these dialects interesting.

An answer to the title of my paper "How fast will a language die when it is officially no longer spoken?" can then be that it is very hard to know. Because

the speakers themselves do not know if someone in the village still speak the language. And they are unwilling to admit it if they do know the language. Our scientific wish to reveal the hidden use of Kalashamon then clashes with the speakers' rights to decide 'what should or should not be done with their language' (England 1992: 33) i.e. if the language should be maintained or abandoned. Moreover a religious barrier and the conflict between western culture versus the local rural culture also prevents clear insight for the investigator.

We found remnants of Kalashamon dialects that would be very interesting to study, much more for historical, linguistic and ethnographic reasons. Unfortunately they are very difficult to get to and from what we know they are dying at a high rate.

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Notes

1 Kalashamon is one of the little known and studied so-called Dardic languages of the Indo-Aryan branch of the Indo-European languages. The dialects concerned are important for historical phonological reasons and also for language contact reasons. It is related to but unintelligible with Khowar.

2 The field work was carried out together with Jan Heegard in three periods from 1995 to 1997. It was conducted with financial support of His Royal Highness Crown Prince Frederik's fund, The Danish Research Council of the Humanities, The Faculty of the Humanities of University of Copenhagen, and stud.mag. Per Slomann's Foundation.

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Komi, an endangered language?

Marija Leinonen

Abstract

Komi, or Komi-Zyrian, is an Uralic language indigenous to the Republic of Komi in the North-Eastern corner of European Russia. It is spoken by some 300,000 inhabitants of the republic and by several thousand outside its borders. In 1992, the language was given official status alongside with Russian. A revitalisation programme began in 1994, and this paper is an interim report on the progress made so far (summer 1998). The main factors affecting the maintenance or loss of a minority language are applied to Komi.

1. Introduction

On September 25, 1998, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe accepted a resolution on the endangered Uralic minority cultures which, among other things, urged the Russian Federation and other countries where they are present to support these people's languages, cultures and traditions, through education in their own mother tongues and through publishing and mass media in their languages (Doc. 8126, June 1998). Among the Uralic languages, Khanty, Mansi, Nenets, Karelian, Vepsian, Livonian, Volian, Izhorian, and most Samoyed and Sámi languages are endangered to varying degrees. Those languages that, according to the report, 'may be endangered' are Mordvin, Mari, Komi and Udmurt. Komi in this context covers both Komi-Zyrian, spoken in the Komi Republic, and Komi-Permiak, spoken in the Autonomous Komi-Permiak district. Both are literary languages, though they are very close to each other.

Carl-Erik Lindberg & Steffen Nordahl Lund (eds.)
17th Scandinavian Conference of Linguistics, vol. II

Odense Working Papers in Language and Communication
No 19, vol II, April 2000

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Printed in Denmark by Odense Universitets Trykkeri